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OUR BENEVOLENT FEUDALISM

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OUR BENEVOLENT
FEUDALISM

BY

W. J. GHENT

THIRD EDITION

New York

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PREFACE TO THE THIRD EDITION

MOST of the reviewing journals have now given their judgment upon this book. But the verdict, it must be confessed, is indecisive. There is not an aspect of the argument which has not been variously viewed; and there has been scarcely a judgment expressed in any quarter which has not been contradicted in some other. The reader who ingeniously suspects the book's purpose to be revolutionary, may suppose that blame will have come solely from the conservatives and praise from the radicals. But a look over the comments reveals no such line of cleavage; for the radicals have often censured, and the conservatives have often, though guardedly, commended.

This expression of censure may be held to invalidate certain opinions expressed on page 176. Of a surety, the reviewing journals have not uniformly "made it their business to be 'nice.'" For once, at least, the imprint of a prominent house has not served its usual office of warding off a hostile verdict. But the anomaly is not difficult of explanation. Some of the defenders of the régime have suspected a grave affront to society and have hurried to the rescue. Laws are silent in the midst of arms: and a

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well-known rule has been overborne in the face of an apprehended danger.

But assuming, in this case, the entire sincerity of all the judgments expressed, it is amusing to note their contrarities. On none of the criteria by which a book is judged is there general agreement. Regarding style, tone, argumentation, purpose, trustworthiness (or its opposite) of data, there is the greatest disparity. The author is not serious, say some; he takes himself too seriously, say others; and others again confess that it is hard to determine whether he is serious or not. The style is this, that, and the other. "It is colloquial and almost frivolous," asserts a staid publication of Philadelphia; it is "declamatory," is a Pittsburg decision. The book is written in "terse, dignified English," says another; it is "well written and elegant in diction," reads an otherwise unfavorable review. So, too, with the general tone. The book is "a sneering presentation," says an Indianapolis oracle, "the author is a cynic"; while a New York journal rejoices that it is written with such "ingenuity and urbanity." "The author's wit is not very witty," writes one. "The tone of gentle sarcasm," writes another, "would provoke the dullest to merriment."

The temperament of the book is also a matter for a wide range of opinion. The author is "an avowed pessimist," says one; his book, says another, "veils a passionate hope . . . for something more in accordance with his ideas of justice between man and man." The journal which deals out opinions to the "fit audience, though few" of Philadelphia municipal re-

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formers, declares that the book "presents a narrow and hopeless view, which by paralyzing all energy and enthusiasm would bring on fulfilment of its worst prophecies"; while a Nebraska editor hopes that it may be "to the overthrow of baronial power what 'Uncle Tom's Cabin' was to the overthrow of the slave power."

Its argumentation comes next. It is written in a "dispassionate, indisputable manner"; its author, according to another, "is a very logical and dispassionate writer." For all that the book is "illogical, improperly based, and unfair," and again, "the argument from facts to causes is not seldom tinged with sophistry."

There is then the matter of its trustworthiness of data. "The facts stated are beyond dispute," says one; "it is remarkable for its painstaking study of economic statistics," says another. Still another avers that "its estimate of current industrial and economical tendencies is unanswerable." On the other hand, one of the professors in the benevolently endowed University of Chicago, though he kindly concedes that "many of its illustrations . . . seem to be based on knowledge," yet somewhat unkindly resolves many of its data into "venomous accusations." And an eminent dispenser of judgments in an eastern city declares — though with commendable prudence he withholds a bill of particulars — that "in the domain of proved facts [the author] wanders blindly and sadly."

Finally, there is the summing up. A Toronto opinion makes the book "the most valuable contri-

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bution to economic literature which has yet appeared in America," and a Chicago verdict names it as "one of three books which every American should have at his fingers' ends." But an eastern Rhadamanthus overrules with the declaration that "it is composed of cheap raillery which will not need very careful consideration by serious men"; and a rather unamiable Socialist reviewer in New York City writes: "If you have a taste for intellectual juggling, the book amuses you. Nothing more."

Doubtless, there is something to be said for each of these verdicts. There must be, for they represent the distilled wisdom of the accomplished men and women whose profession it is to instruct the public as to what it shall read. But it is evident that a further word of explanation is needed. Acceptable critics may disagree as to an author's style, tone, and reasoning; but when disagreements arise as to his inclination and purpose, some portion of blame, it is likely, should fall to himself.

Well, then, this is a serious book. If an occasional touch of satire is discoverable in its pages, as some of its more curious and penetrating readers have averred, the fact is probably due to a native bent and to a strengthening of it by an early acquaintance — now, alas! well-nigh forgotten — with Pope and Dryden. But the argument is serious for all that. It is built upon authenticated data which no one has dared specifically to question; and it pushes home to its natural and logical outcome the development of the tendencies of to-day. There is a possible alternative outcome, it is true, which will be noticed

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farther along; but its mention was omitted because it was expected that a perspicacious reading public would be led to it unerringly and without assistance.

No criticism so far made, it is believed, has shaken the validity of any of its statements. There is little to alter; though, on the other hand, there is much to amplify. Seven of the nine chapters could each be expanded to the dimensions of a book by the use of matter relating to incidents that have occurred and facts that have transpired since the date of publication. Nor are any of its positions shaken. The thing predicted is not exactly a reproduction of mediæval Feudalism, say some. True, but the term is repeatedly qualified, and the divergences from the older form are carefully stated. The political systems of Persia and England are greatly dissimilar, and yet both nations are rightly termed monarchies. Then, too, says a scholarly critic, caste, in its strictest sense, was not a feature of mediæval English Feudalism. Nothing of the kind is asserted, though caste is predicted for the coming order. But, even so, the term is one of varied meanings; in its looser sense it could rightly be applied to the classes of mediæval England, and even in its strict sense to the villeins. "The tenure of capital," writes another, "can never, especially in the absence of primogeniture, become hereditary and fixed." In the first place, the tenure of capital does indubitably tend to become hereditary and fixed; and, in the second place, the matter of blood inheritance is but trifling if the prerogatives and powers of capital augment, or even continue as now. The landless warrior who could raise a suffi-

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cient following to wrest from a baron his estate, succeeded to all the privileges and powers of its former owner; and the swineherd raised to the imperial purple was as much an emperor as one born in the palace of the Cæsars. The philistine adage, "It is but three generations from shirt sleeves to shirt sleeves," which is so often used as an argument for the harmlessness of great accumulations, is not only less and less true, but does office for a pitiful evasion of the question at issue.

Some of the Marxists will have it that Feudalism is impossible, because Socialism is "economically inevitable." There is not room here for discussing this "economic inevitability." Nearly every argument that has been used in its support has successively broken down, and the remainder must suffer the same fate. If Socialism comes, it will come through determination and struggle,—as democracy came and as so-called individual freedom came,—though the struggle will be political and not military. Equally certain with the Marxists of the impossibility of Feudalism are the blissful optimists who hold fast to the faith that Providence looks after "fools, drunkards, children, and the United States of America." Everything will assuredly come out right in the end, they exclaim; and, besides, the great American public would never submit to baronial control. But what mankind—and particularly the American public—will submit to, it may be modestly suggested, is still an open question. It is a far cry back to Venice; but the history of the Venetian Republic might be profitably read by these optimistic fatalists for light

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upon the question of what a democracy will endure if only it be wisely compensated. The Venetian democracy yielded, with scarcely a struggle, its political powers to a small aristocracy, and during the five hundred years ending with the fall of the nation made no real effort to regain what it had given up. It received in return prosperity, pageantry, and glory. The first of these was sometimes — and in the later years generally — a delusion ; but the other two were always fostered. Our own democracy accepts a lesser compensation, though indeed it has not yet surrendered all its powers. Pageantry is so far generally withheld. For pageantry costs money, and the magnates, though benevolent, are not prodigal. But prosperity — though in rather diluted doses — is given to us, and glory is fed to us constantly. Who can doubt that for a further yielding up by the democracy, pageantry also will be cheerfully given ?

Certain observations in Chapter IV regarding the condition of the farmer have also met with objection. The rhapsodists of agricultural prosperity are quite as vocal and insistent now as they were last November. Nothing apparently can dampen their ardor or their eloquence. The growth of farmers' organizations in the West ; the increase of tenantry and of exactions from tenants ; the fact, as now appears, that some eighty-six thousand farmers have emigrated to Canada within the last five years, have no terror for the rhapsodists. These incidents are but further confirmations of prosperity. The statistical experts are all at work, and their figures indicate a flood of agricultural wealth.

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One of the experts has recently shown that the gain to the farmers of the country on the cereal and cotton crops of 1902 over those of 1901 is \$85,173,526. This is a large total, assuming its correctness. But when it is divided among 5,681,257 "farmers, planters, and overseers," their twenty million family dependents, and the 4,459,346 agricultural laborers, it yields a per capita gain of less than \$3. This is not all the farmer's increment for the year, it is true. Though his cattle have fared badly, owing to the competition of range cattle, his hogs have sold well, and his hay, potatoes, flaxseed, and poultry have probably brought better returns than in 1901. With ample allowances and by employing the most approved methods of governmental figuring, it is probable that a per capita gain of \$5 could be produced. Omitting the women and children and the laborers from consideration, the farmer's average gain might be placed even as high as \$30.

It would be interesting to learn what he has done with all his money. He has paid off his mortgage, answers the rhapsodist, sent his children to college, installed a telephone, engaged the service of a circulating library, and subscribed for a daily newspaper. There must have been something left over, for he is now, we are informed, buying a piano. Despite present admittedly high prices, it would seem that a dollar "goes farther" than it has ever "gone" before.

The records and other evidences of a certain agricultural county which the author has investigated since the publication of the book fail sadly to confirm

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the foregoing representations. This county is in a mid-Western State. Diversified farming and stock-raising are carried on, though being in the heart of the corn belt, corn naturally forms its chief product. It has many of the improvements which our rhapsodists harp upon: the roads are gravelled, there is free rural delivery, there are a number of telephone lines, and the hum of the patent corn shredder and husker is heard in the land. It should be stated that these things of themselves are not necessarily a proof of large individual increases of wealth; for the delivery is of course furnished by the Government; the roads are gravelled at the expense of the entire community, and not by special assessment; the telephone lines are generally coöperative, and erected, in part at least, by mutual aid, while the corn shredder is also a coöperative venture. Yet if there be prosperity anywhere in rural America it is here. But the farm mortgage has not been lifted. It has been transferred, in many cases, from an eastern to a local lender. But it tenaciously holds on, and it draws its annual tribute from the soil. Moreover, it is being added to. For the year ended May 31, 1902, new mortgages on farm property in this county reached a total of \$464,326, an excess over satisfactions of \$102,516. For the four years, 1899-1902 (1901 approximated), the excess was \$329,935. The total mortgage indebtedness on farm property is estimated by competent judges at \$1,500,000, on an assessed valuation of \$8,440,265, and it is confidently declared that 80 per cent of the farms (not of the farm acreage) are mortgaged. There is nothing to

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indicate that the figures for this county are exceptional. In the entire State the excess on new mortgages for the last two years (1899-1900), for which figures are at present obtainable, was \$4,783,969, with returns from three counties missing.

Nor do the records altogether sustain the exultant talk about the diffusion of wealth. From statistics prepared by the State Government in 1900 it would appear that this county's increase of taxable property during the last decade was 73.4 per cent, and that some 72 per cent of the population own no property whatever. The proportion of property owners was 34.5 per cent in 1880, 31.5 per cent in 1890, and 28 per cent in 1900. The percentage of persons owning property up to \$2000 in value declined in the last census decade from 27.1 to 21.8. This percentage of the propertyless is exceeded in fifteen, and approximated in twenty-four, of the ninety-two counties of the State.

Tenantry is common, though probably stationary. A rising rental is exacted; from one-third of the product, the rate usual a few years ago, the terms have risen to one-half, and a further advance is possible. In spite of the demand for farm labor, wages are low, averaging \$14.36 per month for the State and \$15.16 for the county. Many farm owners consider it more profitable to hire labor and work their farms themselves than to rent them. The small holdings are frequently merged into larger ones, and a general tendency to concentration is observable. There is good ground for belief that the conditions observed here (except, perhaps, those regarding ten-

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antry) are common to a great many counties of the corn belt. A "prosperity" attended with increased mortgage indebtedness, exorbitant rentals, expropriation of small property owners, and low wages for farm laborers, has its evident disadvantages, despite the statistical rhapsodists.

As for the book, there is, at this writing, little to change. The facts and tendencies are as stated therein, and the *logical* outcome is that predicted. There is, as has been said, a possible alternative outcome. That is the assertion of the democratic spirit and will, the conquest of the baronial régime, and the transformation of the industrial system into that of a coöperative commonwealth. There is no possible return to competition, free or unfree. The great industrial plant of the nation will be run for the benefit of the many or for the benefit of the few. It lies with the citizenship to determine which form it will have. But no escape from baronial dominance can come through mere indulgence in the vague hope

"that somehow good
Will be the final goal of ill."

Far less can it come out of the subservience, the apathy, and the acquiescence so generally observable to-day; less yet out of a blind faith in the "economic inevitability" of a certain form of society. It can come only by a collective determination to secure the democratic ownership and operation of industry.

W. J. G.

NEW YORK CITY, March 2, 1903.

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